



Traces of Postmodernism in Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*

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Abstract

Martin Crimp is regarded as one of the substantial playwright in Britain in the last decade of 21st century. He has written on the issue of woman, consumerism and similar topics, changing structures of family . Although he wrote most of his early plays in absurd tradition, he then began to write about the social issues of his time with the beginnings of nineteen nineties. It is certain that this brought a certain change in his themes and style. However, he wrote his plays following his decision on writing postmodern subjects. *Attempts on Her Life* is one of his late plays debuted in 1997 and regarded as his masterpiece. The play subjects a woman who meets the audience in different roles such as mother, lover, killer and child throughout the play. Crimp tries to evoke the audience to feel the temporariness and some other features of postmodernism in this play. For this reason, this study will examine the traces of postmodernism in Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*.

Keywords: *Postmodernism; temporariness; the issue of woman; nineteen nineties; in-yer-face.*

Martin Crimp begins to appear in the British stage at the end of nineteen seventies with his absurdist plays as he has been influenced by Beckett and Ionesco during his readings in his university education. He continues writing such plays and some novels till the beginnings of nineteen-nineties determining his flourish as a striking playwright. It is likely that he estimated the approaching way of writing style called as social reality, thus he began to write such plays.

Although Crimp was not regarded as the typical playwright profile of that time, many of the significant playwrights were in their twenties and had rage against Thatcher, Crimp would have produced one of the most crucial play of that decade. Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane and Anthony Neilson were the leading

figures of 1990s and dominant theatrical movement in-yer-face. Therefore, they were likely expected to produce such an influential play. However, Martin Crimp, older than these three and did not call himself as a figure of in-yer-face, wrote the long-expected play of the decade. His “Attempts on Her Life” was premiered in 1997 and brought an unexpected fame to Crimp. Sierz remarks the importance of this play with the following sentences:

In the dying days of John Major’s Tory government, a sorry tale of sleaze and continuous xenophobic clamour, *Attempts on Her Life* appeared as both a brilliantly original and a distinctly European play, both a comment on the late twentieth century and a vision of what the theatre of the future might be (Sierz 49).

In this manner, Crimp also conveys the European values to British stage by overcoming the insularity of many British playwrights. For this reason, while he has been recognized in many European capitals as his plays have been performed there, British audiences would know him later and thus he would catch the recognition in his country later than other European countries.

Postmodernism and “Attempts on Her Life”

The play consists of seventeen scenerios, some of which may be interconnected to each other in a direct way. Although there is not a main character, it is then inferred the presence of a woman as the protagonist. This woman is pictured as mother, survivalist, terrorist, activist and a make of car in different scenes. In addition, the lines do not involve any name concerning the characters, and the reader is enforced to imagine and establish the events. *Attempts on Her Life* begins with the scene of “All Messages Deleted” which comprises of eleven phone messages. In this part, Anne is sometimes missed by her husband, sometimes her dad shouts at her on phone, and sometimes she is abused. This brief prelude gives us some clues about the peculiarity of the play because Anne, who is a postmodern character, is loved, threatened, praised, humiliated, but she can put an end to all these events by touching a button to delete messages in her phone. There are seventeen scenarios in this play and each of these parts mention about different characters and, in fact, all these characters represent the different ages of Anne, or who knows the humanity. In addition, Crimp becomes a link between absurd tradition and in-yer-face movement, so he combines these two theatrical movements in his *Attempts on Her Life*, since he has written his former plays in absurd tradition and he has changed his style

with the beginnings of nineteen nineties. Additionally, Crimp states that *Attempts on Her Life* is his best play because he has felt himself fine without sticking to write his play in well-made plot and form naturalistic characters. This statement gives clue about the postmodern traits of the play because postmodern texts do not concern well-made plots and characters. They are more likely loosened texts indicating different points of unconnected events.

Crimp also states that he decided to write *Attempts on Her Life* when he was bored of conventional plays and turned to write postmodern plays. This treatment likely reveals the creativity of Crimp contrary to his background surrounded by cliché concepts. As to the play, Anne is the central character of Crimp and she is called as Annie, Anya, Anny and Annushka in different scenes. In addition, she welcomes the audience sometimes as a child or a young girl or an old woman who is waiting and crying for her child. Moreover, she appears in different characters as following:

The recipient of a variety of telephone messages, the heroine of a film, a victim of civil war, a typical consumer, a megastar, a tourist guide, a make of car, a physicist, an international terrorist, an American survivalist, an artist, a refugee's dead child, a victim of aliens, the girl next door, the object of a police investigation, a porn star, and the subject of a conversation among friends (Sierz 49).

Postmodern theory urges the ambiguity in literary texts. This may refer to characters, title, plot and etc. Crimp establishes this feature of postmodernism firstly with title: *Attempts on Her Life*. Such a title evokes certain movements aiming to interfere any action or situation. However, the reader remains confused concerning the play and the rest of the plot. Following parts of the play increase the ambiguity because the play is divided into seventeen different scenes. Each scene brings a different type of character called as Anny, Annie and Annushka and etc. However, the reader is devoid of forming any well-made character from these parts because the scenes reflect different types of individuals and thus prevent the reader in constructing any well-structured character. In addition, the piece also lacks any constructed plot and story as a feature of postmodern texts. As reader is in difficulty of creating a character, the same situation is present for a well-made plot. Therefore, the reader finds himself in many events detached from each other. Anne is sometimes

witnessed as a member of consumer society, she is then offered as a porn star criticising the society in which she lives.

Besides, Crimp tries to request all the people from different ages, jobs, classes and he achieves this aim by characterizing Anne in different social levels. Therefore, he aims to reach the simplicity and effacement of class distinction that postmodernism aims. For example, while the first scene subjects Anne as a rich woman living with a rich man, the following scene depicts her as an individual likely lost some relatives in war and now struggling for peace. In addition, while Anne is seen as a small child living with her parents in an unhappy environment contrary to expected, she is also witnessed as a mother who has been left by her only son. However, her son then comes with his wife and two children in tenth scene titled as Kinda Funny. In addition, two scenes of the play are played in foreign languages with translation because Crimp wants to emphasize the localization of his work.

What is more, Crimp refers to seminal books of literature and religions as a trait of postmodern theory called as intertextuality and by doing so the writer tries to shape his text through the association of the mentioned works in the mind of readers. In the sixteenth scene, he addresses the holy book of Muslims, Koran and Bible of Christians “She has hung on a cross to die... (translation) Risen on the third day from the dead... (translation) Grown a beard... (translation) ... and entered Mecca in triumph (translation)” (*Plays Two* 277).

Postmodern subject is destructed and the society is full of images, thus, postmodern people can form their individualities by transferring among the images. In addition, these images gain new forms in minds and bodies of each different person. The new forms of technology and information became central to the shift from a productive to a reproductive social order in which simulations and models increasingly constitute the world so that the distinction between the real and appearance becomes erased. This feature of postmodern society is portrayed extensively in Crimp’s related work yet some parts will be taken to exemplify the situation.

The camera loves you – The camera loves you – The camera loves you We need to sympathise – We need to empathise – We need to advertise We need to realize – we are the good guys – we are the good guys We need to feel – what we’re seeing is real It is not just acting – it is far more exacting – than acting – we are talking reality... (*Plays Two* 223).

This scene is really short and it covers only two pages, but it refers to many things related to consumerism. As it has been mentioned before, mass media and television are regarded as the most important elements of postmodern consumerism. In addition, if the postmodern consumerism is in question it should not be only referred to buying or selling something. The postmodern theory asserts that the contemporary media does not represent the reality but it fictionalises. In this manner, the media does manipulate the reality in the accordance of its own wishes to gain profit, and this event cannot be regarded strange in the postmodern society.

Conclusion

This study has tried to analyse Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* through postmodern literary features. It has been emphasized that Crimp experienced a great change from being an absurdist playwright to a postmodernist one. It is also certain that the changing conditions of society have forced him to write such plays. However, he reached the fame by means of these postmodern plays and *Attempts on Her Life*, the most significant example of these plays.

References

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